

## Christ's Obedience and Covenant Obedience

By Dr. Nicolaas H. Gootjes<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Reformed theology has long shown great interest in the covenant. To give only one example, Calvin mentioned the covenant throughout his commentaries.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the covenant was not limited to Calvin, as the official documents of the reformed churches prove. It is true that the covenant is not discussed thematically. No article of the Belgic Confession deals specifically with it, nor does the Heidelberg Catechism devote an answer to the covenant. The covenant is brought up particularly in the discussion of the sacraments. It has a fundamental place in the defence of infant baptism (*Belgic Confession*, art. 34; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 27, 74). In connection with the Lord's Supper, the cup which is the new covenant in Christ's blood is explained as a visible sign and pledge of our sharing in Christ's salvation work (Lord's Day 29, 79).

Being in the covenant has consequences. One is spelled out in the *Canons of Dort*: the grace of God toward covenant children who die in their infancy (see I, 17). The *Form for Infant Baptism* highlights another result: "since every covenant contains two parts ... we are,

---

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Nicolaas H. Gootjes is Professor of Dogmatics and Ethics at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Hamilton, ON. This article is a speech presented to a Ministers' Conference of the Canadian Reformed Churches held on May 27, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Much material was collected by W. Van den Bergh, *Calvijn en het genadeverbond* ('s Gravenhage: W.A. Beschoor, 1879). I. Van Dijk published a very critical review, arguing that Calvin was not a covenant theologian; see his *Gezamenlijke geschriften*, vol. 1 (P. Noordhof: Groningen [1917]) 275-339. This is true in the sense that the covenant was not a dogmatic theme in Calvin's theology, but it cannot be denied that he used it frequently. On Calvin and the covenant, see also H.W. Wolf, *Die Einheit des Bundes: Das Verhältnis von Altem und Neuem Testament bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Verlag des Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1958).

through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience." Baptism is here directly connected with the obligation of an obedient life: "We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life." In short, the covenant requires our obedience. In the *Form for Adult Baptism*, this covenant obligation to a new obedience is stated emphatically in the fifth question: "Do you firmly resolve, as is proper for a member of Christ and his church, always to lead a Christian life and not to love the world and its evil desires?" According to our ecclesiastical papers, being in the covenant carries with it the requirement to live an obedient life.

This emphasis on the covenant, and the resulting obligation of keeping God's law, is raising questions today. If the covenant obliges the covenant people to obey God's commands in order to receive the benefits of grace, at the least the impression is given that salvation is by works. Even if it is not totally dependent on our works, salvation would at least be partly based on our good works. Emphasis on covenant obedience could lead the Reformed church back all the way to the Roman Catholic teaching of good works. Recently, I have received several questions concerning this particular issue, and it appears to be a much debated issue. It is not hard to understand why this is seen as an important issue. Does the emphasis on covenant obligation not undermine the biblical teaching as it was formulated at the time of the Reformation: Salvation is by faith alone (*sola fide*), and through grace alone (*sola gratia*)? Often another expression is added: only by Christ (*solo Christo*). Are we saved by Christ's death and, in addition, by our own covenant obedience, or are we saved by Christ alone? Are our works a necessary addition to Christ's salvation work?

The theological name for this part of Christ's work of salvation is "the active obedience of Christ." In dogmatics, a distinction is often made between active and passive obedience.<sup>3</sup> Christ's suffering and death can be characterized as passive obedience: He had to undergo suffering and death. This part of his work for us was concentrated at the very end of his life, provoking the question whether there was not

---

<sup>3</sup>See for a first introduction, L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 379ff; H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4. ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1939, 363ff; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 314-327.

more to the life of our Saviour. Over time, this led to the recognition of the active obedience.

In the following, we will first investigate that development as it is visible in the confessions. Next, we will look at the Scriptural basis for this doctrine. And finally we will discuss the question whether the doctrine of Christ's active obedience is compatible with an emphasis on covenant obedience.

### **The Confessional Development of the Doctrine of Christ's Active Obedience**

The doctrine of Christ's active obedience was developed at a relatively late date. The origin of the expression "active obedience" is not known,<sup>4</sup> but the doctrine itself emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century among the churches of the Reformation.

The doctrine developed slowly. Luther emphasized the vicarious work of Jesus Christ: While sinners did not fulfill the law, Christ fulfilled it fully by his obedience and love towards God and man. Luther said of Christ: There is the man who did this. I depend on him, he has fulfilled it for me, and he granted me his fulfilment.<sup>5</sup> Luther spoke in comprehensive terms, and his statement does not contain a very specific indication of how Christ fulfilled the law. Luther's co-worker Melancthon mentioned two sides when he discussed Christ's work. In our stead Christ suffered the punishment which we deserved, and he fully fulfilled the law. But these remarks were made separately without being brought together as the passive and active side of Christ's obedience.<sup>6</sup>

In the early decades of the Reformation, a doctrine of Christ's twofold obedience did not exist. This can also be seen in the early Lutheran confessions. The Augsburg Confession does not even

---

<sup>4</sup>This was stated by Ch. W. F. Walch, in his study on Christ's active obedience; see K.R. Hagenbach, *De ontwikkelingsgeschiedenis der Christelijke leerstukken* (tr. J. Quast; Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1896) 925, who took it from Baur.

<sup>5</sup>See R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (reprint of the 4. ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959) vol. 4-1, 244.

<sup>6</sup>R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 4-2, 468.

mention Christ's life. Following the Apostles' Creed, it stated that Jesus Christ was born, suffered, was crucified, died and was buried in order both to be a sacrifice, not only for original sin, but also for all other sins and to conciliate God's wrath. In Melancthon's defence of the Augsburg Confession, nothing substantial is added to this statement.<sup>7</sup> The Lutheran confessions brought up the active obedience for the first time in the *Form of Concord* of 1577. Since that is rather late in the century of the Reformation, we first need to look at the developments in the Reformed community.

Within the Reformed world, Christ's active obedience became an accepted doctrine during the 1560's. A very interesting development can be noted here. Article 18 of the Gallican Confession (1559), dealing with our righteousness, confesses that our righteousness is based on forgiveness, rejecting all other means to make us righteous before God. We do not claim any virtues or merits: "We simply rest on the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us both to cover all our sins and to make us find grace and favour before God." Confessing that our righteousness is based on forgiveness, the Gallican Confession rejects all other means that could make us righteous before God.<sup>8</sup> This statement is comprehensive but not very precise. It speaks in general terms about Christ's obedience, without distinguishing between active and passive obedience.

A similar statement can be found in article 22 of the 1561 edition of the Belgic Confession: "...faith embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits." However, this is expanded later in the article: "...faith embraces Jesus Christ and all his merits, as many holy works as he has done for us."<sup>9</sup> Here we find for the first time in the confessional literature a direct reference to Christ's good works done on our behalf. The question is whether the statement "holy works done for

---

<sup>7</sup>See the English translation in R. Kolb, T.J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 38, 120.

<sup>8</sup>J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2. ed.; Amsterdam: Bakhuizen van den Brink, 1976) 108; Ph. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (6. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) vol. 3, 370.

<sup>9</sup>The 1561 text reads: "Iesus Christ donc & tous ses merites, tant de saintes oeuvres qu'il a faites pour nous."

us” really refers to Christ’s active obedience. Several reasons can be mentioned why this is indeed the case.

In the first place, Calvin had developed the doctrine of Christ’s active obedience over the years. When he published his Catechism of Geneva, in 1545, he asked the question why the Creed goes from the birth of Christ directly to his suffering and death. The answer is: “Because nothing is dealt with here, except what so pertains to our redemption, as in some degree to contain the substance of it.”<sup>10</sup> This is an indication that Calvin at this time did not consider Christ’s life itself as having saving merit. But in his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559), he did recognize the importance of it. In his chapter on Christ the Redeemer, Calvin asked the question how Christ has abolished sin and acquired righteousness for us. In his response, he does not immediately refer to Christ’s death, he begins with Christ’s life: “To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience,” proving this with Romans 5:19 and Galatians 4:4,5.<sup>11</sup> Calvin comes back to this in the chapter on justification, particularly in his debate with Osiander who taught that Christ is righteous according to his divine nature. Calvin does not deny the importance of the divine nature, but he maintains that Christ was righteous according to his human nature: “But did he obey in any other way than when he took upon himself the form of a servant? From this we conclude that in his flesh, righteousness has been manifested to us.”<sup>12</sup> References to Christ’s active obedience can also be found in Calvin’s commentaries.<sup>13</sup>

A second indication that the active obedience of Christ was confessed in the 1561 edition of the Belgic Confession can be found

---

<sup>10</sup>See Calvin: *Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics, vol. 22; tr. J. K. S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) 98; *Calvini Opera* (P. Barth, ed.) Vol. 2 (München, 1970) 82.

<sup>11</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, xvi,5 (ed. J.T. McNeill; tr. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 507.

<sup>12</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, xi, 9; 735.

<sup>13</sup>See also W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (tr. H. Knight, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 115; P. Van Buren, *Christ in our Place: The substitutionary Character or Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 29-34; E. Emmen, *De Christologie van Calvijn* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1935) 100f.

in Beza’s Confession. When Guido de Brès made the Belgic Confession, not only did he consult the Gallican Confession, but also a confession Beza had published in 1559. In this confession, Beza had stated that not only had Jesus Christ borne our punishment, but he also fulfilled all righteousness so as to cover our unrighteousness.<sup>14</sup> This second part about Christ fulfilling all righteousness cannot refer to his suffering, for that had been mentioned before. In the combination with Christ’s suffering, Christ’s righteousness must refer to his active obedience. This is confirmed by the added textual references, Romans 5:19 and Matthew 3:15. The first text in particular is a standard reference for Christ’s active obedience.

The text of the Belgic Confession itself confirms that the active obedience is in view. Earlier in Article 22, a statement of Paul was mentioned that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works. This was a quotation from Romans 3:28, strengthened by the addition of the word “alone.” The works are called “works of the law,” the things we ought to do in obedience to God’s law. Later, in the same article, the confession says: “Jesus Christ, therefore, and all his merits, as many holy works as he has done for us, is our justice.”<sup>15</sup> By denying the role of our works in justification, and drawing attention to Jesus Christ’s meritorious works on our behalf, the Belgic Confession indicates that his whole life has saving merit. At the same time it must be recognized that the importance of these holy works is not highlighted. This beginning is so tentative that later the need was felt to state this more emphatically.

This can be confirmed from later confessions. The question whether the Heidelberg Catechism deals with the active obedience of Christ is hard to answer. Klooster’s new commentary on the

---

<sup>14</sup>Th. Beza, *Confession de la Foy Chrestienne* (Geneva: Badius, 1559) art. III, 24, p.24; see for a translation of a later, expanded version, J. Clark, *The Christian Faith* (Lewes: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992) 12.

<sup>15</sup>The original French text (1561) shows this relationship clearly. First it says about us: “nous sommes iustificier par la seule foy, ou par la foy sans les oeuvres.” A few lines down it says about Jesus Christ: “Jesus Christ donc et tous ses merites, tant de saintes oeuvres qu’il a faites pour nous, est nostre iustice.”

Catechism does not mention this in its General Index.<sup>16</sup> The term “obedience” is used several times in connection with Christ. In Lord’s Day 6, 1 Corinthians 1:30 is quoted, which says that the Mediator is, among other things, our righteousness. Without further explanation, it cannot be proven to mean active obedience. This is taken up in Lord’s Day 23: God imputes to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ (answer 61). Lord’s Day 29, on the Lord’s Supper, states that Christ wants to assure us that all his suffering and obedience are ours (answer 79). Although the word “obedience” is mentioned, the fact that it follows Christ’s suffering makes it questionable whether this refers to Christ’s years of obedient living.<sup>17</sup> Nor does Ursinus’ explanation on these sections provide any indication that the Catechism refers to a doctrine of active obedience. Two other confessions of the 1560s, the traditional Thirty Nine Articles (1563) and the extensive Second Helvetic Confession, do not speak of active obedience, either.

The development of this doctrine can be traced by following the Belgic Confession. In 1566, the Belgic Confession was revised by Synod Antwerp. A very small but significant change took place in article 22: the word “and” was added: “Jesus Christ and all his merits, and as many holy works as he did for us, is our righteousness.” The addition of the little word “and” sets the “holy works” apart from Christ’s merits. In addition to Christ’s work to atone for our sins (passive obedience), the confession refers to Christ’s holy works for us (active obedience). This is the first time that the active obedience is confessed unambiguously.

Not much later, this doctrine was also included in the confession of the Lutheran churches in Germany. The Augsburg Confession had spoken in general terms: The righteousness of Christ which God reckons to poor sinners as righteousness of faith. This earlier statement did not explain what is involved in this

---

<sup>16</sup>F.H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: a Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2001).

<sup>17</sup>This applies also to the expression in the Form for the Lord’s Supper, that Christ “by his perfect obedience has fulfilled all righteousness.” Wedged between two statements concerning Christ’s suffering, it can hardly be taken as referring to Christ’s perfect obedience during his life on earth.

righteousness. The Form of Concord elaborates on this by stating that we “...are justified on the basis of the sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone.”<sup>18</sup> Here, the merit of Christ goes beyond his suffering and death; it includes his life of obedience. In the same breath, it is denied that we are contributing to it: “...without the least bit of our own merit or worthiness, apart from all preceding, present or subsequent works.” Here, the doctrine of Christ’s active obedience is formulated in its complete form. Christ’s entire obedience is mentioned in addition to his suffering and death. The emphasis on the active obedience is confirmed by denying the merit of human works.

The Form of Concord provides an extensive explanation in the following sections: [Christ’s] “obedience consists not only in his suffering and death but also in the fact that he freely put himself in our place under the law and fulfilled the law with his obedience, and reckoned it to us as righteousness.” This confession also speaks of Christ’s “total obedience” consisting “in his deeds and suffering, in life and death.”<sup>19</sup> Later, in the same chapter, the reason is given why Christ’s active obedience is presented emphatically. The confession states here that our regeneration through the Spirit “...does not mean that after rebirth unrighteousness no longer clings to the essence and life of the justified and reborn. Instead, it means that with his perfect obedience Christ has covered all their sins, which inhere in human nature during this life. These sins are not taken into account; instead, even though the justified and reborn are and remain sinners to the grave because of their corrupted nature, they are regarded as upright and pronounced righteous through faith, because of this obedience of Christ (which Christ has performed on our behalf for his Father from his birth to his most shameful death on the cross).”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Form of Concord, Solid Declaration, article 3, 9; I used the translation in R.Kolb, T.J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 563.

<sup>19</sup>Form of Concord, Solid Declaration, article 3, 15; *The Book of Concord*, 564.

<sup>20</sup>Form of Concord, Solid Declaration, article 3, 22; *The Book of Concord*, 565f.

The active obedience of Christ is emphasized over against the idea that sin no longer resides in man, as promoted by Osiander.<sup>21</sup> This means that the emergence of the doctrine of Christ's active obedience in both the Reformed and the Lutheran confessions has one and the same origin: Osiander.

The acceptance of the active obedience of Christ as a doctrine of the church was confirmed during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century on two occasions: in the reworking of the Belgic Confession and in the Westminster Confession. In 1619, the Synod of Dordrecht again expanded the text of article 22, resulting in the present form of this statement: "He imputes to us all his merits and as many holy works as he has done for us and in our place." By adding the expression "and in our place," Synod made it crystal clear that the Reformed churches in the Netherlands confessed Christ's active obedience.<sup>22</sup> Although the Canons of Dort do not deal with the issue itself, it is possible that it is referred to in the Rejection of Errors.<sup>23</sup>

The confessional development of this doctrine comes to its conclusion in the Westminster Standards. Concentrating on the Westminster Confession, we find it referred to in chapter 8 of the confession, dealing with Christ as the Mediator. It expresses the active obedience in the following statement:

---

<sup>21</sup>See for the rejection of Osiander's views, Form of Concord, Epitome, art. 3, rejection 1, 4; Solid Declaration, ch. 3, 2, 60, 62f; see also M.J. Arntzen, *Mystieke rechtvaardigingsleer: Een bijdrage ter beoordeling van de theologie van Andreas Osiander* (Kampen: Kok, 1967), ch. 3, 77ff.; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 321ff; G. Seebasz, art. "Osiander," in *TRE* 25 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1995) 511ff.

<sup>22</sup>Bogerman, who served as the chairman of Synod Dordrecht, was not in favour of this change. He even had proposed a weaker formulation which was ambiguous on the active obedience, but Synod did not follow him; see on this H.H. Kuyper, *De Post-Acta* (Amsterdam; Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, 1899) 338f; G.P. van Itterzon, *Franciscus Gomarus* (repr. Groningen: Bouma's boekhuis, 1979, or. ed. 1930) 249f; *Johannes Bogerman* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1980) 105f.

<sup>23</sup>The Canons mostly deal with the death of Christ and its importance for us, but the active obedience appears to be mentioned in the Canons of Dort, ch. 1, Rejection 3, where the imperfect obedience of faith is contrasted with Christ's merits.

This Office, the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that he might discharge, he was made under the Law, and did perfectly fulfil it."<sup>24</sup>

The article continues dealing with Christ's suffering, crucifixion, death and burial, in agreement with the Apostles' Creed. Christ's complete obedience to God's law was not mentioned in the early creeds, but now it is added as a significant doctrine next to his suffering.

The decisions of the Westminster Assembly bring to its conclusion a development of around 80 years, during which the doctrine of Christ's active obedience was acknowledged with increasing clarity and confidence.

### The Scriptural Basis

A fundamental question is how this doctrine can be founded in the Scriptures. How did the confessional statements defend the inclusion of this doctrine? It must be remarked, here, that the history of this doctrine has not been helpful in clearly defining the Scriptural underpinning. We cannot find this in the Belgic Confession. In the original edition, marginal texts were included but none of these appears to refer to the active obedience.<sup>25</sup> The marginal texts were not updated when the second edition clarified the formulation referring to the active obedience. And the same Synod of Dort which added a clear statement of the active obedience, omitted altogether the marginal texts. The Westminster Confession referred to Galatians 4:4 for the statement that Christ was made under the law, and to Matthew 3:15 and 5:17 to support its teaching that Christ fulfilled the law perfectly. This is a good beginning for surveying the Scriptural basis of the doctrine of Christ's active obedience.

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul discusses the issue of the

---

<sup>24</sup>I took the text from a facsimile edition of the Westminster Confession, p. 18, in *The Westminster Standards: An Original Facsimile* (Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths Publications). The active obedience is also mentioned in answer 48 of the Larger Catechism and answer 27 of the Shorter Catechism.

<sup>25</sup>It refers to texts such as Rom 4:5; 3:24, 27; Phil 3:9; 2 Tim 2:9.

law extensively. It comes up in the context of our salvation: We "...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Jesus Christ that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law" (Gal 2:16). He goes on to state: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree"" (Gal 3:13). But Paul does not stop there, he continues: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal 4:4,5). Paul indicates that Christ's work of salvation is not exhausted with taking upon himself the condemnation for our sins and dying for us. He was also "born under law" for us.

This "law" is specifically the law given to Israel after the Exodus (Gal 3:17). The Son of God became a Jew, and as such was subject to the rules of the Mosaic law. Longenecker takes the expression "born of woman" as an indication of Jesus Christ's true humanity and representative quality. He distinguishes this from Christ having been "born under law" as an indication that Jesus Christ was born as a Jew. For "he came as "the Jew" under obligation under God's Torah, so fulfilling the requirements of the law in his life (cf. Mat 5:17-18) and bearing the law's curse in his death (cf. Gal 3:13; Phil 2:8)."<sup>26</sup> Paul, in this text, emphasizes the comprehensive nature of Jesus Christ's obedience. Jesus Christ fulfilled all the requirements of the law, not only those applying to all people, but also the laws God had given specifically to the Jews. By his circumcision, he was obligated to keep all the laws God had given to Abraham's offspring. He subjected himself willingly to all these laws, to redeem not only the Gentiles, but also the Jews.

The comprehensive nature of Christ's obedience is presented in another way in Philipians 2:8. After having stated that God's Son had become a servant, Paul elaborates on Christ's service: "He humbled himself, and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" The remarkable expression "obedient to death" does not

---

<sup>26</sup>R.N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1990) 171.

simply mean that Jesus Christ died in obedience to God. It means that Jesus Christ was obedient all the way, even to the point of undergoing death. Death is not the sum total of his obedience, but the culmination of his obedience.<sup>27</sup> Paul is stating that Jesus Christ, in his obedience, was even willing to die for us. This is confirmed in the application Paul adds to this. He emphasizes Christ's life of obedience to encourage his readers to serve others (2:7), working out their salvation with fear and trembling (2:12) and to become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation (2:15).

In connection with Christ's general obedience, his circumcision (Luke 2:21) deserves attention. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant, marking the incorporation of the child in the covenant God established with Abraham. It means dependence on God, leading to the obligation to live according to the rules of the Old Testament law (Gal 5:3). Christ's circumcision means not only that he is officially incorporated in the covenant people; it also means that he is bound to fulfill God's law for his people.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, we must consider the function of the "thirty years." Luke mentioned that Jesus Christ was about thirty years old when he began his public ministry (Luke 3:23). We know hardly anything about this period of his life on earth, with the exception of his going to the temple with his parents, followed by the statement that Jesus went down to Nazareth with his parents and was obedient to them (Luke 2:51). This sums up the task Jesus Christ fulfilled during a period of at least 17 years. It says, pointedly, that he was obedient to his parent as a young adult. The fifth commandment requires the honouring of one's parents; Paul says: "Children, obey

---

<sup>27</sup>H.A.W. Meyer, *The Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians and to Philemon* (tr. J.C. Moore; repr. Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1980) 77; cf. G.F. Hawthorn, *Philippians* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1983) 59; P. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 227.

<sup>28</sup>See for this, A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to S. Luke* (ICC; 5. ed., Edinburgh: Clark, 1964) 62; S. Greijdanus, *Lucas*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1940), 121; J. Nolland, *Luke*, vol. 1 (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 79.

your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1). This command was fulfilled by Jesus: He was obedient to his parents, showing filial love. If we are correct in assuming that Joseph died before Jesus Christ began his public ministry, his obedience includes working as the breadwinner of the family.<sup>29</sup> It is not made known to us in detail what he did, but the fact is clearly stated: Jesus Christ fulfilled the fifth commandment by honouring his parents all through his life, including transferring the responsibility for his mother to the disciple whom he loved (John 19:26f). During the more than thirty years of his earthly life he obeyed God's will perfectly (Phil. 2:8).

This is followed by the obedience Jesus Christ performed during his public ministry, beginning with his baptism. When John the Baptist was hesitant to baptize him, Jesus Christ responded that it was proper for him to do this to fulfill all righteousness. There is general agreement that the baptism was an act of obedience on the part of Jesus Christ, although there are different opinions concerning the meaning of the word "righteousness".<sup>30</sup> This was followed by another act of obedience: led by the Spirit, Jesus Christ went to the desert. Rather than beginning his task of teaching the people, he had to leave them behind to do battle with the devil, without being strengthened by food. Here, active and passive obedience are very closely connected: his going to the desert (active obedience) caused him great suffering (passive obedience).

General statements concerning his obedience during this period are found in the gospels. Jesus Christ emphasized several times that he had to be obedient (John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38). Particularly interesting is the first statement: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." In the concrete situation of John 4, it means that he preached to the Samaritans who had come out to listen to him. Another general statement is given in the well known

---

<sup>29</sup>I.H. Marshall remarks: "Jesus is obedient to his parents since in general obedience to the Lord includes obedience to parents," with a reference to Col 3:20, *Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 130.

<sup>30</sup>See e.g. J. Van Bruggen, who takes this as promised and saving reality of his heavenly kingdom, see *Matteüs: Het evangelie voor Israel* (Kampen: Kok, 1990) 67; but D.A. Hagner explains it as God's saving activity, *Matthew*, vol. 1 (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1993) 56f.

text Mark 10:45, where his obedience received a special application: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This was said when the disciples were discussing among themselves their future status. They were looking for a high position when Jesus Christ would be king (vs. 37). In response, Jesus Christ told them that they should serve, and he presented himself as an example. By saying that he had come to serve, he characterized his whole life as service. He had done this all his life, first by serving his parents, and, from the beginning of his public ministry, by serving the people as their teacher. This service would culminate in his death. In the explanation of this text, Christ's death has correctly received much attention within the context of atonement for sins, but it should not be forgotten that at the same time his whole life is characterized as obedience. A remarkable aspect of this statement is the seamless connection between what we now call Christ's active and passive obedience. His suffering is part of his active obedience; it can be seen as the culmination of his active obedience. This suffering, leading to his death, was not the punishment for sins he had committed; rather, it was the result of his obedience to take the place of his sinful people.<sup>31</sup> In Christ's life, the active obedience led to the passive obedience. In other words, his obedience in undergoing the suffering is part of his active obedience. Active obedience is the overarching doctrine, it includes the suffering and death as a sacrifice willingly brought by Jesus Christ.

The epistles further elaborate on the significance of this doctrine. We are first confronted with a statement from the difficult chapter Romans 5 where the results of the transgression of one is contrasted with the results of the righteousness of one.<sup>32</sup> Through the

---

<sup>31</sup>See on this, K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, vol. 2 (2. ed.; Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1949) 227; Schilder expanded on this in his *Christus in zijn lijden* (3. ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1977) vol. 2, 105f; 208f; vol. 3, 218-221; see also G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 319f.

<sup>32</sup>The Greek expressions used in Romans 5:18 can be translated as "through one transgression" (NIV: "as the result of one trespass") and "through one righteousness" (NIV: "one act of righteousness"). It is more probable, however, to take these as the "transgression of one person" and

disobedience of the one person the many were made sinners (Rom 5:12). This statement confronts us with the reality of original sin: all who are connected with Adam share in his sin. In contrast, through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous. We are particularly interested in the meaning of the word "righteous." Sanday and Headlam take this to mean obedience in death<sup>33</sup>, but this does not agree with the play on words contrasting disobedience of the one man with the obedience of the other. Over against Adam's disobedience of Adam in eating from the forbidden fruit, the obedience of Christ must refer to his concrete and complete obedience in submitting to God's will. It necessarily includes his obedience in willingly undergoing death, but the text provides no reason for limiting it to that one act. Dunn says that we need to take it in a limited sense of referring to Christ's death because that constitutes a correct antithesis to the one act of disobedience of Adam,<sup>34</sup> but that is based on a misunderstanding. The mistake is based on a failure to realize the full meaning of obedience. By nature, obedience is a continuous state, requiring a continuation of obedience, but even one act of disobedience makes a person disobedient. The obedience of Christ in Romans 5, in the context, can only mean his whole life in obedience to God.

We can also look at the famous passage Philippians 2:6-11 which describes the coming of God's Son into this world. Verse 8 states that he "...humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." Calvin, who in his exegesis is usually sensitive to the dogmatic implications of a statement, says that he who was Lord of life

---

"the righteousness of one person." One reason is that the surrounding verses clearly speak of "one person," see vs. 16, 19. Moreover, it cannot be maintained that God requires only one act of righteousness. J. Murray concludes that "obedience comprehends the totality of the Father's will as fulfilled by Christ," *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 205; see also 201f.; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1975) 290: "Christ's perfect fulfilment of God's righteous requirements."

<sup>33</sup>W. Sanday, A.C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, repr. 1968) 142.

<sup>34</sup>J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary, 38a; Dallas: Word Books, 1988) 297.

and death was, nevertheless, obedient to the Father till death. He adds that Jesus was not only covered with ignominy, but was also accursed by God, using this as a pattern of humility for all people.<sup>35</sup> Calvin's statement that Christ was obedient to the Father till death comes close to recognition of Christ's active obedience without actually distinguishing it, as could be expected. Later commentaries mention this explicitly; e.g., the 19<sup>th</sup> Century commentator H.A.W. Meyer pointed out that the word "till" implies that "death is pointed out as the *culminating point*, as the highest degree to which He obeyed."<sup>36</sup> This is supported by the application given by Paul: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (verse 12). Christ's continued obedience is an incentive for the believers to persevere in obeying God.

To these texts is often added the statement of Hebrews 5:8, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. " This text has been connected with the obedience Jesus Christ showed during his life on earth. Hughes states: "As the incarnate Son, then, it was absolutely necessary for him to learn obedience, since his obedience was essential for the offsetting of our disobedience."<sup>37</sup> Lane, however, points out that the word "obedience"

---

<sup>35</sup>J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1984) 58f.

<sup>36</sup>H.A.W. Meyer, *The Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (tr. J.C. Moore; Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1980) 77; S. Greijdanus remarks that "obedient" does not refer to an act of obedience but to continually being obedient, *De brief van den Apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Philippi* (Amsterdam: H.A. van Bottenburg, 1937) 196; according to G.F. Hawthorne, the expression measures the magnitude of Christ's humility, conveying the idea that Christ, in the word of Caird, was "obedient to God to the full length of accepting death," *Philippians* (Word Biblical Commentary, 43; Dallas: Word Books, 1983) 89.

<sup>37</sup>B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 128; J. Moffatt, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, repr. 1957) 67; Ph. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 187: "As the incarnate Son, then, it was absolutely necessary for him to learn obedience, since his obedience was essential for the offsetting of our disobedience," with references to Phil 2:8 and Rom 5:19.



is preceded by the definite article. Since the context refers to Christ's suffering, the word "...has a very specific meaning: it is *obedience* to the call to suffer death in accordance with the revealed will of God."<sup>38</sup>

If Hebrews 5:8 is not convincing, we may be able to replace it with 1 Peter 1:2 where the recipients of his letter are addressed as "God's elect, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood." This translation does not give any indication that it may refer to the active obedience of Christ, but the translation can be questioned. The Trinity is mentioned, and to each person a characteristic is added: the foreknowledge of God the Father, the sanctification by the Spirit, and the obedience to Jesus Christ and the sprinkling with his blood. If the NIV translation is compared with the original text, it will be noted that the place of the name "Jesus Christ" has been changed. Literally, the expression can be translated as "for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ." The issue is what can be meant with the word "obedience." The NIV translation takes Peter's expression as meaning the Christian's obedience to Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> But this is awkward, for it would mean that under one preposition Jesus Christ is presented as both the object of our obedience and the subject of sprinkling his blood. Several solutions have been attempted. One commentator says that the sanctification by the Spirit leads to obedience and sprinkling with Christ's blood.<sup>40</sup> But it is unclear how not only our obedience but also our being sprinkled with Christ's blood can be taken as the goal of the Spirit's work of sanctification. Spicq, explaining it against the background of Exodus 24, also attributes the sanctification to the people: after the people promised to observe the rules of the law, Moses sprinkled them with the blood

---

<sup>38</sup>W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary, 47; Dallas: Word Books, 1991) 121.

<sup>39</sup>So also J.E. Huther, *The General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude* (tr. J.E. Huther; repr. Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1980) 207, and M.E. Boring, *1 Peter* (Abingdon N.T. Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 55.

<sup>40</sup>Ch. Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, repr. 1961) 92.

of the sacrificed animals.<sup>41</sup> The question who would think of this particular event when reading the trinitarian greeting with which 1 Peter opens remains unanswered.

The statement itself consists of three parts, apparently connected with the three Persons of the Trinity, each part introduced by a preposition. They all qualify the elect, who are strangers in the world. They are elect:

- according to the foreknowledge of God the Father;
- in (the process of) the sanctification of the Spirit;
- for the obedience and the sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ.

The parallel with the two previous statements favours the interpretation that the third statement refers to Jesus Christ as the one who performed the obedience.<sup>42</sup> At first glance, this appears not to suit the final words: sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. However, according to Hebrews 9:11-14, Jesus Christ offered his own blood to cleanse us from our sins. The natural interpretation of 1 Peter 1:2 is to take obedience as referring to Jesus Christ's active obedience and the sprinkling of his blood as referring to his passive obedience.

Christ's obedience during his whole life on earth is clearly stated in the New Testament, and it is summarized as one of the two important things Christ did for us in 1 Peter 1:2. It was correctly recognized in the Reformed and Lutheran confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Active Obedience and Our Obedience

The survey of New Testament data may require us to do some self examination: Did we pay sufficient attention to Christ's active obedience? When dealing with his life, his teaching and his suffering have been discussed extensively, but did we also pay sufficient attention to his faithful obedient life? To be sure, Scripture does not

---

<sup>41</sup>C. Spicq, *Les Épitres de Saint Pierre* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1966) 42f.; so also Boring, *1 Peter*, 55f.

<sup>42</sup>This is recognized by Beza, see the note in Huther *The General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude*, 205, although Huther does not follow this interpretation. Boring says: "The Greek may also be understood to refer to Jesus' own obedience and giving his blood," *1 Peter*, 55.

provide much concrete information concerning the daily obedience Christ performed during his earthly life, and that can be used as a partial explanation. The gospels do not concentrate on his acts of obedience to God's Ten Commandments, but, rather, on his teaching and his suffering and death. But we may have neglected to pay attention to his active obedience, even in general terms. Christ's active obedience deserves the attention as a work Jesus Christ faithfully performed throughout his life on earth.

At the same time, this should not be placed in opposition to covenantal obedience. Scripture clearly expresses not only that the people in general should live according to God's will (see Rom 2), but in particular that God's people should live an obedient life. Throughout Scripture it is emphasized that God's people should perform covenant obedience. Let us follow some of the main lines as drawn by Scripture.

God had made a covenant with Abraham, when he had told Abraham to divide the animals and had promised him that his descendants would live in Canaan. But this covenant meant that in the meantime Abraham had to live by himself, as a foreigner without rights, without security, trusting God and waiting for the time when God's promise would be fulfilled (Gen 15:13-16). This covenant was confirmed when God appeared to him, promising him that his people would greatly increase in numbers. On that occasion, God affirmed that Abraham had to "walk before God and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). The two events belong together, although there is a difference in emphasis. While in Genesis 15 Abraham's faith is in the foreground, including his obedience (Gen 15:9,10), in chapter 17 the obedience is in the foreground, against the backdrop of his faith.<sup>43</sup> The covenant is established by God's initiative, but if it is to be healthy, Abraham has to be a faithful servant devoted to God.<sup>44</sup> No specific commandments are given; the obedience required of Abraham is comprehensive.

We can also think of the Ten Commandments. When Moses, in his final great speech to the Israelites, reminded them of the Ten

---

<sup>43</sup>W.H. Gispen, *Genesis*, vol. 2 (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1979) 135.

<sup>44</sup>V.P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, vol. 1 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 461.

Commandments, he reminded them that God had spoken to them out of the fire. Moses continued: "He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets" (Deut 4:13). The law belongs to the covenant, to the extent that it can even be called "the covenant."<sup>45</sup> And Moses impressed on the Israelites that they should keep the law. Covenant people should keep God's law.

Many instances could be cited from later books in the Old Testament emphasizing the need for God's people to obey God's will, but we will, rather, look at the New Testament. Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil the law (Matt 5:17). He showed in the Sermon on the Mount what that meant for the sixth, the seventh and the ninth commandment. Later, he stated that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, and our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22:37-39). Jesus Christ, by giving this law of love, did not abolish the Ten Commandments, for he added that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

That is confirmed in the epistles where these laws are maintained.<sup>46</sup> Paul appeals to the fifth commandment to underscore that children should obey their parents (Eph 6:1). He adds that they should do so "in the Lord," referring to Jesus Christ. Because of King Jesus, they should hold on to the existing commandment to obey their parents. In 1 Timothy 1, a catalogue of sinners is given, following the order of the Ten Commandments (verses 9f.). And James maintains the law when he writes: "If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker" (James 2:11). Jesus Christ fulfilled the law for us in his active obedience, but this never implied that we now can ignore God's law and live in our own way. Followers of Christ are not antinomians.

When Paul had explained that Jesus Christ had died for our sins, he added that our old self was crucified with him so that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Rom 6:5-7). After this, the law

---

<sup>45</sup>See J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (tr. N.D. Kloosterman; Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996) 1f.

<sup>46</sup>J. Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics* (2. ed.; Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1983) 38ff.

returns: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." This has a negative side to it: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:1,2). And this, in turn, leads to the return of the Ten Commandments (Rom 13:8-10)!

This important section of Romans is preceded by a doxology (Rom 11:33-36). That is the true place of our obedience to the law in the New Testament: our obligation to keep the law comes out of our gratitude for God's mercy, as is indicated in the emphatic "therefore" right at the beginning. And that is, actually, in complete agreement with the Old Testament, for the Ten Commandments are preceded by a reference to God's great works of freeing his people from Egypt. The law was never given to us to earn salvation. Jesus Christ earned salvation for us, both by his active and his passive obedience. But this redemption brings God's people back to the covenant, and back to God's good law. There is no opposition between Christ's obedience to God's law and our obedience to God's law. Out of gratitude to God for Christ's active obedience, we will be very active in our own obedience.

## Preaching on the Active Obedience of Christ

By Rev. George van Popta

After hearing Dr. N.H. Gootjes's speech delivered at a ministers' workshop, which is also published in this edition of *Koinonia*, I was given an angle for my then imminent preaching through the Lord's Days 34-44 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In this essay I will show how I, in several of the sermons, worked out the aspect of the saving benefit of the active obedience of Christ.

### Lord's Day 34, Q&A 94,95 – The First Commandment

... By winning the victory over the third temptation and by his obedience to the first commandment, the Lord Jesus teaches us to place all our trust only in the LORD God and to worship him only. However, there is more to it.

The obedience of Christ is imputed to us (credited to us; considered to be ours). As it says in Article 22 of the Belgic Confession: "... Christ our righteousness ... imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place."

Believers receive all the benefits of the Lord's work. Not only of his suffering, but also of his righteous obedience. Not only does his death on the cross benefit us, but also his life of obedience benefits us. The whole life of Christ, from his birth to his death on the cross, benefits us and is important for our redemption.

When we believe in Jesus Christ, God "...imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place."

Christ's obedience to the first commandment in the third temptation is one of the holy works he did for us and in our place. If you believe in Christ, God reckons Christ's obedience to the first commandment to be yours. God considers you to have won the victory over every temptation to trust in something or someone other than him. His victory is yours. His obedience is yours. It is freely, graciously imputed to you, if you believe in him. Then God looks at you as if you had obeyed the first commandment without ever having